

Toward a 21st Century Community: A Revitalizing Older Cities Field Hearing

Hosted by **Representative Brian Higgins**

in coordination with

The Northeast-Midwest Institute and the Northeast-Midwest Congressional Coalition

August 15, 2008 10:00am — 12:45pm

Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society Museum

Delaware Park, Buffalo

10:15- 11:10am Panel One: Housing

Mary Holtz, Supervisor of the Town of Cheektowaga, *Challenges of Inner Ring Suburbs*

The Town of Cheektowaga may be a suburb of Buffalo but driving down Walden Avenue or Genesee Street you would be hard pressed to tell at what point you had crossed from the town into the city. A map may delineate boundaries but they are non-existent in the lives of our citizens. The problems of the city are the problems of Cheektowaga, especially along the border neighborhoods.

- Security - Security is the one problem that is most evident in any discussion with the residents in any neighborhood. When one is afraid to leave their home to even go to their car – we have a definite problem. Without secure neighborhoods we will not be able to accomplish anything. Both the perception and reality of safe neighborhoods is one of the cornerstones of stable, viable neighborhoods.
- Code Enforcement – Code enforcement is an important component to preserve our neighborhoods. The need to constantly inspect and keep our homes from deteriorating is necessary especially in our older neighborhoods. Cheektowaga had over 200 housing code cases in Town Court in 2007; this year has seen a doubling of these cases.
- Aging Population – The number of elderly residents in Cheektowaga, as in other neighborhoods in Western New York, has increased nearly twice as fast as in the nation as a whole from 1950 to 2000. Nearly 30% of Cheektowaga's population is over the age of 60 and about 11% is over the age of 75.
- Low Income Home Owners – The average income of Cheektowaga residents is approximately \$41,000 – with 10% having an income under \$15,000 and over 40% having an income under \$35,000. It is difficult for many of these families to invest additional money to improve their homes with the increasing costs to these families just for daily living expenses.
- Vacant Homes – The Town of Cheektowaga has approximately 700 vacant homes. The maintenance of these structures ultimately falls upon the taxpayers of Erie County. The

costs for the clean up, boarding up and demolition of these homes are paid to the Town by the County and then added to the County tax rolls. As a result, these houses or lots, if anyone would want to purchase them, are now too expensive since all back taxes and costs for maintenance are added to the buyer's price.

- Absentee Landlords/Irresponsible Renters - Another serious problem is the growing number of absentee landlords and the fact that they often do not properly maintain their properties or are short term owners seeking to flip properties for a quick profit. It is difficult to take these owners to court to enforce Cheektowaga codes. Along the same vein, there is also the problem of irresponsible renters who are destructive or refuse to conform to simple laws such as using garbage cans.
- Declining Property Values – Vacancies, lack of proper upkeep and aging infrastructure work hand in hand to devalue property which in some cases can speed up the downward spiral of a neighborhood.
- Economic Development – Approximately 20% of the commercial property in the Town of Cheektowaga is vacant. Many of these businesses are along Walden Avenue and Genesee Street. Again, the cost of maintaining these buildings will be added to the tax rolls, creating a “Catch-22” of being too expensive to purchase and renovate.
- Aging Infrastructure – Cheektowaga’s growth along the border areas began in the early 1900’s with the development of the railroad industry. The greatest growth in Cheektowaga took place following World War II when the population of Cheektowaga grew from approximately 40,000 in 1940 to 110,000 in 1960. Many of the sewers in Cheektowaga date back to the 1920’s and others, built in later years, do not meet the standards required by present laws. Cheektowaga is presently under a consent order-- with the estimate for remedial work at \$60 million. In addition, streets, sidewalks and curbing in many of our neighborhoods are in definite need of repair.

We need a collaborative effort – the Town, City, County, State and Federal governments all coming together to assist with these challenges.

There are many encouraging and affirmative actions under consideration. The City of Buffalo and the Town of Cheektowaga have worked together to try to improve the conditions along our common borders. The police departments of both municipalities have cooperated with each other to increase enforcement in these areas. There have been a number of joint meetings with residents of Buffalo and Cheektowaga in a cross border coalition to discuss the problems which are common to both communities. Town officials have met with officials of the City to discuss how we may mutually work to improve conditions. While the situation for Cheektowaga is growing more difficult every year, it is even more so for the City, where the problems are so pressing and so enormous.

A little while back, a group of concerned officials from various municipalities came together as concern grew over Erie County’s plan to sell tax liens to outside interests. Our concern was that properties of little value would be held as loss leaders and those of value

would be sold. Again, these vacant properties would have little chance of being sold since the expenses attached to them could never be recouped. An offshoot of the meetings held by this group was the creation of a County task force, spearheaded by Erie County Legislator Robert Reynolds and composed of members from various levels of government and the business community, which is attempting to identify the problem throughout Western New York and to creatively look for solutions.

Some of the solutions that are being considered include:

- Foreclosures on property after one year with the qualification that we must give regard to elderly or low income individuals.
- Land Banking on a County Level – The City of Buffalo wants to go it alone – which is understandable given the enormity of the problem faced by the City -- but that does not preclude the County from establishing a Land Bank for the rest of the county.

The Town of Cheektowaga has been discussing various ways that we, as a community, can approach the problems of a first ring suburb. Some of the ideas that we are considering and, in some cases, have incorporated are:

- Under the auspices of our Community Development Program, we are in the process of preparing an RFP with the goal of developing a holistic approach to helping to solve the problems of the border neighborhoods – looking at housing, types of businesses that would be profitable, quality of life issues, and etc.
- Accumulating data on homes that failed to pay taxes – with the objective of trying to intervene prior to foreclosure.
- The creation of distressed area regions which would allow homeowners with a slightly higher level of income than already established to qualify for financial assistance for home improvements. These people who now fall between the cracks – their income is too high for assistance but too low for bank loans -- could be assisted through our Community Development program.
- Exploring the establishment of a Town Housing Court which could more quickly expedite the process for addressing housing violations. Our justice courts in Cheektowaga are so overwhelmed that housing violations are often difficult to resolve in a timely manner. Compounding the problem, as previously mentioned, is the fact that the number of violations that are brought to court have increased enormously.
- The formation of a collaborative effort between Town officials and others responsible for code enforcement, senior citizen programs and community development programs to assist our elderly homeowners who learn that their homes are in violation of our Town codes. We must be proactive in assisting our elderly. The Town needs to assist these

individuals before they are brought into court, as they often are living on a fixed income with very limited resources for the upkeep their homes.

- Our police force has increased its security procedures and visibility in these older communities including utilizing walking and bicycle patrols, funded with Community Development funds, with positive results.
- Cheektowaga has a Neighborhood Preservation and Wellness Program through which housing and commercial property maintenance inspections are systematically made to ensure that property is maintained. Complaints are investigated and the office acts as liaison with individuals and neighborhood groups.
- An initial meeting has been conducted with CSX Railroad representatives to explore the development of a prime piece of property that, with the addition of a new spur, could potentially result in economic growth and vitality for the Walden Avenue neighborhood.

In conclusion, a 2006 Brookings Institution paper, *One-Fifth of America: A Comprehensive Guide to America's First Suburbs*, puts forth a comprehensive description of the challenges faced by the first ring suburbs of older cities in our nation and the "policy blind spot" in which we have existed over the years. For those of us in the Northeast and Midwest our problems are continuing to grow. We need State and Federal government policies and assistance that will help us to come to terms with our new suburban reality and which will keep us economically and socially thriving communities right along side our cities.